

EPA Chief Apologizes for Toxic Spill Affecting Rivers in Colorado, New Mexico
McCarthy says she isn't sure what happened in abandoned gold mine, but would fix any
flaws in procedures



Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Gina McCarthy *PHOTO: ANDREW HARNIK/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By

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WASHINGTON—U. S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Gina McCarthy apologized Tuesday for a mine spill in Colorado caused by her agency, but she indicated she didn't know much about what happened and would seek to fix any flaw in the agency's procedures.

"I am absolutely deeply sorry this ever happened," Ms. McCarthy said at a news conference in Washington. "But I want to make sure we react positively and in a way that's credible and we move this forward."

An EPA cleanup crew on Aug. 5 accidentally triggered a breach in an abandoned gold mine in the Southwestern part of Colorado, releasing an estimated three million gallons of toxic, mustard-hued sludge through a river system spanning three states. The sludge, which flowed down the Animas River and emptied into the San Juan River in New Mexico, contains such contaminants as lead and arsenic from the Gold King Mine, north of Silverton, Colo., one of thousands of abandoned mines across the western U.S. The governors of Colorado and New Mexico declared emergencies Monday, freeing up state funds to help clean up a mine spill that sent an estimated three million gallons of toxic, mustard-hued sludge surging through the regional river system. Joe Barrett joins Tanya Rivero. Photo: AP

When asked whether EPA was reviewing whether it should change how it cleans up old mines, Ms. McCarthy said she was still learning about what happened.

"I don't have a complete understanding of anything that went on in there," Ms. McCarthy said of the incident at Gold King Mine. "If there is something that went wrong, we want to make sure it never goes wrong again."

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Ms. McCarthy said her agency was "committed to a full review" to determine what happened, though she didn't elaborate on what kind of review or what organization-EPA or another one-would lead it.

"We will undoubtedly look back on whether we did the job we could, how we could have done it faster and work with them [state and local government leaders] to make sure they have confidence in the ability as well as the capacity of our agency to move quickly," said Ms. McCarthy, adding at another point that she thinks the agency has a "solid network in place now to be able to get the job done."

She said her agency has been in touch with the White House, congressional delegations of affected states, including Colorado and New Mexico and state leaders. In addition to those two states, EPA has sent dozens of staff to Utah, another state the river system crosses into, to help with the cleanup.

The governors of Colorado and New Mexico declared emergencies Monday, freeing up state funds to help pay for the cleanup. The announcements allocate \$500,000 in state money for Colorado and an additional \$750,000 for New Mexico, on top of \$500,000 disbursed Friday.

Ms. McCarthy said there have been no reported cases of anyone's health being compromised and that as the plume of contaminated water moves further into the river system, the levels of contamination drop. She said the agency was providing alternate

water supplies, including bottled water, to the residents who depend on the affected waters. She didn't say when the river would be reopened for drinking or recreation activities, such as kayaking, which is popular in the region.

Ms. McCarthy acknowledged the anger that residents and state leaders are feeling toward EPA, whose response to the spill has been criticized as too slow.

"My message to folks who are angry is we are working as hard as we can and we know it's a difficult situation," Ms. McCarthy said. "We have folks working around the clock."

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